

The Road Best Traveled

What to Look for in an Ideal Walking Route

Of every 10 Americans, 6 get little or no exercise. No wonder the nation is experiencing an epidemic of obesity — plus high rates of heart disease, diabetes, and other major diseases. There's a core group of avid walkers, though, who seem to have little trouble leaving behind their couches and easy chairs. What's their secret? They've tailored walking to their own personal interests so they can make it a satisfying part of their everyday routine. Anyone can do the same. Answer the following questions to get started.

Do you love nature and the outdoors?

You may have a wealth of nearby hiking trails, if you just know where to look. Even urban environments may have walkways leading past woods, streams, or rivers.

Do you like to be around people?

Invite a friend to walk with you, or join a walking club. Again, you may be able to find excellent opportunities close to work or home.

Got a sense of adventure?

Just by walking instead of driving to the post office, you can experience your neighborhood in a brand-new way. Try a sidewalk safari through unfamiliar suburban roads and around cul de sacs, or explore a local college campus. Ask physically active friends or coworkers to introduce you to their favorite hiking routes.

Easily winded?

Follow a flat, easy route and take your time. Build up to more challenging walks over time.

Tired of wimpy workouts?

Try a hilly route, or visit an office building and take the stairs.

Hate car exhaust, temperature extremes, or humid or wet weather?

Find out how early your local indoor mall opens its doors to mall walkers. For example, some malls permit people to enter at 8 AM, well before shops open at 10, for brisk treks through the long, shopper-free walkways.

No safe place to walk?

If you're worried, walk with a partner. Consider taking a quick drive to a new launching-off point in a safer neighborhood. This also might help you avoid heavy traffic or lack of sidewalks.

How to find the route for you

Once you know what you're looking for in a walking route, here's how to find it:

- Log on to an Internet search engine and plug in the name of your town, city or county, plus words such as "walking," "hiking," "route," "trail," "mall walkers," or "parks and recreation." Or, check out www.hejoly.demon.nl — a comprehensive, searchable directory of hiking trails around the world — or www.webwalking.com/hiking.html, the Hiking and Walking Homepage (click on "Places to Hike").

- Let your fingers do the walking. Check the Yellow Pages under "camping equipment" and call a specialty store for advice on local trails. Or try your local parks and recreation office, or a fitness trainer at a health club.
- Find out if your librarian knows references for local walking routes.
- Ask around. Get advice from anyone you can think of — you may discover someone who would love your company on their next walk.

